

FUTURE SCOPING – DEVELOPING EXCELLENCE IN URBAN PLANNERS

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It is an important time for urban planning, for planning education and professional development in Australasia, as it is globally. As the role planning can and should play in sustainable urban development gains recognition internationally (UN Habitat 2000) planners need to ensure they have the competence to offer guidance on how best to create future cities, towns and rural communities. As with all other professionals, planners must demonstrate their ability to transform understanding into practical and achievable outcomes. This must be the key to planning education, training and continual professional development.

Here I identify some of the challenges facing urban planning; consider excellence and planning and the implications for education and lifelong learning. I highlight the need to develop the skill of recognising and acknowledging how perceptions of differences can affect the planning decisions that are made. Competence in cross-cultural communication is an aspect of professional education which has been under-emphasised yet it has a key role in planning in the future.

Introduction

Although changing, urban planning has been and possibly still is one of the most misunderstood disciplines and professions. This may be because the profession has not been good at communicating what planning is about and what it can do. Because of this, too often planning is seen as irrelevant to people's lives and it is seen as a game played out between developers, bureaucrats and elected officials - with the public as bystanders. And yet, given trends in urbanisation, globalisation and the need to respond to climate change, planning has a key role to play at the level of nation states as well as the city region, towns and neighbourhoods.

Since the Royal Town Planning Institute in the UK undertook its review of planning education (RTPI 2003) other associations have followed. The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) published its discussion paper in early 2008 and the South African planning schools have recently undertaken their own review (Todes 2008). Although one of the objectives of the RTPI review was to examine how to enhance the quality of planning education and practice, the balance of attention was given to examining how to

provide for the supply of professional planners and technical staff to meet needs in the United Kingdom. As a result, less emphasis has been placed on pedagogy; how to teach planning and develop excellence in planners. Yet now more than ever, there is a need to consider how best to develop excellence in addition to increasing the supply of planners. There is a need to understand and give effect to the current challenges facing urban planning.

What is urban planning and what distinguishes it from other professions?

Urban planning is a recognised profession of trained individuals who perform an important role for society. Along with medicine, engineering, law and teaching, it is an activity society wants and it is an activity society expects and needs people to be expert in. Modern professions are about ensuring delivery of appropriate goals. Planning is also a way of thinking which can bring benefits to businesses and communities as they think about their spatial needs and the implications of decisions.

Think of 'planning' and people tend to think of financial planning, family planning, career planning. Planning is about making preparations for the future. The important thing is that there is intention to do something feasible and practical, beautiful and creative. Often awareness surfaces when there has been a lack of 'sound' planning; when unsafe and inaccessible environments are created; the unrealistic development of flood plains and river valleys, the insensitive development of sacred and special places; roads driven through areas without appreciation or sensitivity to the impact on communities, or the creation of new communities without adequate facilities. All this, despite the lessons that should have been learnt from earlier social planning and new towns in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

So urban planning is crucial to people's lives. It involves urban spatial future; creating well-designed sustainable urban areas, anticipating needs and population trends, advising on the sustainable configuration of places; where people live, work and play. It's about creating spaces and places that work for everyone; taking a long-term view and learning about the qualities of place important to people (Florida 2008). Urban planning incorporates sustainable management, urban design and strategic place making.

Future-scoping is central to urban planning. Plans must provide a vision for the future – a shared vision, integrative and long term in perspective.

Urban planners need to constantly keep up with developments in business, politics, science and engineering to understand their implications for the ways in which they might best plan for our urban areas.

Today **sustainability** is given a high profile and yet it is what effective planners have been doing for decades; ensuring that decision makers have the information needed about the environmental, social/cultural and economic implications of development proposals.

Often “we only see what we think is possible.” Planners need to work at being creative and to think beyond current, often, limited horizons. As Landry (2006 p.93) suggested, the greater focus of **creativity** should be on finding imaginative solutions to day-to-day needs.

Fifty years ago Robert Kennedy, the first Professor of Planning at the University of Auckland, said that the purpose of planning was ‘to control land use for the creation of the physical environment conducive to better living.’ The world has moved on and today there is an understanding that it is much more than this. ‘Planning now has a developmental agenda and a focus on inclusiveness, including the promotion of gender equity’ (Todes et al 2008).

Urban planning today and in the foreseeable future, concerns how places and spaces work at a range of spatial scales; national, regional, city, neighbourhood; understanding how the environment (both built and natural) impacts on different groups of people; thinking and acting strategically, making connections, building partnerships, looking to the long term, interacting with related professionals, working effectively with the community, coming up with creative solutions and crucially building the evidence base to plan ahead. So it is about evaluating and monitoring trends, developing scenarios. In order to do this effectively it is about understanding how the development industry functions as much as how the environmental, social and political systems work. The spatial dimension of planning is crucial. Urban spatial planning is a way of looking at the world in a connected integrative way. Understanding the spatial implications of decisions is something all agencies need to do to contribute to sustainable development.

Developing excellence in urban planners - what are the challenges?

There are many challenges facing planning and they can be grouped into three broad areas. Firstly ensuring planning is up to the job; secondly ensuring urban planners (no matter where they work) have the necessary

knowledge, skills/competencies and values; and thirdly ensuring that planning is understood by all stakeholders and communities of interest.

Challenge 1 - Ensuring planning is up to the job

Urbanisation, climate change and resources present the biggest challenges for planners against a back drop of globalisation. The lessons about how long it can take for a message to be popularized have been drawn into stark relief with Al Gore's *The Inconvenient Truth* (Gore, 2006). People have long heard (although now better understand) the warning of global warming. It has taken years for the world to absorb the environmental messages of people like Rachel Carson. Born over 100 years ago, she was a science writer whose first love was the sea and her skill was to synthesise the results of scientific work. In 1962 she completed 'Silent Spring', just months before her death, highlighting the dangers to the environment of pesticides, and this led to the growth of the environmental movement. Planning needs to continue to address the challenges of climate change, population and the rural/urban divide for the design of communities, our transport systems, the retrofitting of suburbs and how our cities and towns relate to the countryside. The world is seeing unprecedented population changes to plan for; growth, ageing, migration, growing diversity and the unprecedented extremes of wealth and poverty and exclusion all need to be taken account of. For the first time the global population is more urban than rural (UN Habitat 2008). Scientists are predicting that agricultural production will need to increase globally to provide food and fuel. Trends in democratisation are leading to demands for more involvement in processes and decision making, including planning. Planners have a responsibility to give meaning to sustainability and transform this understanding into meaningful action. The second challenge is to identify and develop the necessary skills and knowledge.

Challenge 2 – Ensuring all planners have the necessary skills, competencies and knowledge.

Planners need to demonstrate their ability to transform understanding into practical and achievable outcomes. To achieve this educators need to emphasize the development of competence (OECD 2005); The tendency of judging and being judged by certificates rather than the ability to do an effective job is something which clearly concerned Jane Jacobs in her last book, 'Dark Age Ahead' (2004). Employers want to see more than credentials; they want to see people demonstrating competence. One's ability to do a job depends on knowledge, skills and qualities. Diligence,

conscientiousness, passion and positiveness are qualities cited by planning practitioners. Arguably, all knowledge is value laden (Rydin 2007). An understanding of diversity, equality and inclusion as a knowledge component is now recognised by many, although not by all, as important to planning. Without this, a planner may well unknowingly act incompetently in discriminating against certain groups.

A sense of right and wrong, probity, awareness of equality and diversity, and social values are key as is developing a sense of response-ability to continually change the profession for the better. The fact that, in many countries, the planning profession is not representative has perpetuated the problem. It is often highly gendered, or lacking in input from ethnic and cultural minorities or disabled people. Deliverers of planning programs have a responsibility to ensure that planners have the necessary skills and knowledge. They can do this by working with employers to track what competencies planners need to be highly effective and by scoping ahead to identify the emerging skills which will be needed. This includes the skills of effective negotiating, developing cultural competence and cross-cultural communication; community participation; solution finding; project planning, inter-disciplinary working, collaboration and partnership.

Challenge 3 Ensuring Planning is understood

The third challenge is ensuring that planning is effectively understood; communicating how planning can contribute to tackling climate change and giving effective meaning to sustainability and where the statutory system is limited, working to expand its reach. Planners have a professional responsibility to be positive about the possibilities of planning, particularly during times which are challenging. Communicating is crucial for planners – and texts and maps are how a lot of the information is communicated. Planners often do not know if potential users really understand what the maps are intended to say. The abstract and technical space created through maps does not always relate to the reality of people's lives. When this happens a gap opens up so the way plans are produced and the form they take is crucial to making them readable and understandable.

Developing Excellence in urban planners - what being an excellent planner means

An excellent planner is someone skilled at envisioning the future and communicating the possibilities; showing an outstanding understanding of how the environment (both built and natural) impacts on different groups

of people; expert at thinking and acting strategically, highly effective at making connections, looking to the long term.

An excellent planner interacts with other professionals, works effectively with the community, comes up with creative solutions and builds the evidence base to plan ahead. Planners need to work effectively with other disciplines and professions and bring a clear expertise to the table.

Research shows that, on average, it actually takes ten years to become expert in one's field (Ericsson et al 1993). Studies of human excellence look at what highly effective people do and how they do it, what they think, feel and how they behave. They suggest that the fundamental characteristics of highly effective practitioners can be summarised as follows:

- clarity about what they are looking to achieve
- knowing their outcome and a grasp of what they want;
- having the flexibility to use a wide range of possible approaches, behaviours and responses;
- using all the senses so that they can adapt quickly and respond effectively (Gardner 2006 summarising the work of Peters 1993 and others).

'How' questions are key. How are places made better to live; safer? How are designs for the future made sustainable? How is sustainability defined effectively? How are communities engaged in planning? Thinking "how" develops creativity. It also places the emphasis on doing, on being positive and creative and making decisions. Some interesting insights into the definition of an excellent planner have come from colleagues across the world. They have identified commonalities and raised questions. So far the insights can only be classed as anecdotal since the research has been unscientific. Nonetheless, reactions proved striking in that many simply had not asked this question recently or ever. Many do see an excellent planner as someone who challenges existing practices and someone who can link different disciplines. Some senior practitioners emphasize the technical skills. They also want people who can address the challenges ahead in urban design, transport and affordable housing. One very experienced academic in the United States quite confidently said that an excellent planner should have their bags packed under their desk. This person was making a very serious point in that planners need to be prepared to stand by their professional judgments and say what they

believe to be right rather than what others might want them to say. Colleagues in the UK have consistently said that excellent planners think, question and probe critically and creatively.

In his recent book 'Five Minds for the Future', Howard Gardner (2006) made an assessment of some of the cognitive abilities needed in the future to be highly effective. As well as having a spatially disciplined mind there will be a need to ensure that the following types of thinking are developed:

- Synthesizing (able to look at things from different disciplinary perspectives);
- Creating (generating innovative ideas which exert an influence on the discipline);
- Respectful (modelling respect for difference and other professions);
- Ethical (putting knowledge to constructive use).

Given there will be a need for a number of very well developed types of thinking by excellent planners, the roles of universities, planning agencies, professional institutes and individuals need to be reviewed.

Developing excellence in urban planners – the role of universities, planning agencies, professional institutes and individuals

The expectations partners have of planning education depend on which hill they stand on and the perspective they take. Providers are responsible for educating and developing planners intellectually through scholarship; employers want planners to 'hit the ground running' whether in policy development or approving permissions for development. Public sector agencies are involved in protecting the public good and private sector agencies have a key responsibility to their shareholders. Elected politicians are looking for expert advisers to help support decision making and communities want professionals who will treat their expertise as they would that of the developers.

Responsibilities of Universities

Universities are knowledge creators and disseminators, communicating knowledge through teaching and learning. Universities create new

knowledge and understanding through research. Hence the need for research-based, and research-led, teaching when students are exposed to, learn from and contribute to cutting edge research. In addition to the 'critic and conscience' role, Universities are also leaders – demonstrating excellence and this should include sustainability, equality and cultural diversity, all fundamental to planning. There needs to be education about sustainability and for sustainability supported by examples of sustainability in action through the implementation of redevelopment and expansion of university campuses over the coming decades (Girardet 2001).

Universities have been engaged in educating professionals for over a century. It is only relatively recently that studies of what are the most effective pedagogies or sets of pedagogies for teaching the professions effectively have been given a higher profile. Shulman's (2005) concept of the signature of a profession and the signature pedagogy is useful. From work on teaching he found that it is very difficult to learn how to practice without powerful, consistent models of practice. These we can study, engage with and reflect on deeply (Shulman2005, p.16). His work on law, medicine and engineering has shown that the modes of teaching inextricably linked with professions are quite distinct. To be effective, Shulman found that, whatever the discipline and whatever the pedagogy, it has to be habitual, routine, visible, accountable, interdependent, collaborative, emotional, predictable and affect-laden (Shulman 2005, p. 11).

What might be the implications of this for a planning program, its distinctive pedagogy and curriculum? Planning, as in teaching and other professions, needs powerful models of practice and therefore needs to assess whether enough time is spent actually observing and studying accomplished planners. Planners operate in a range of different arenas, so educators need to be sure to observe and model those involved in a wide range of activities. Planning education needs to communicate to students clearly what the pedagogy involves and what it is designed to do. For instance, when key skills of spatial measurement or report writing are introduced, these need to be developed habitually rather than simply appear in year one and reappear again in year three. Given the temporal as well as the spatial dimension of planning, there is a need to develop the skill of handling time horizons, stretching from day to day right through to decades and beyond. Planners need to be able to communicate to stakeholders in accessible ways. Planners need to work effectively with other disciplines and professions and bring a clear expertise.

Another area to consider in planning education is when and how discipline skills and ways of thinking and doing are developed. How are the common areas of knowledge for built environment professionals taught? Generic undergraduate courses, such as that recently introduced in Melbourne, are based on the principle that it is more effective and efficient to develop discipline skills as specialist skills at the postgraduate level. Generic built environment skills can be identified which apply to architecture, planning, surveying and engineering. In this way students develop with their wider peer group of professionals before specialising. To ensure that students learn what role different specialisms bring to the development of sustainable cities, these generic courses would best be team taught.

If the development of specific professional skills is left until the postgraduate level, then inter-disciplinary and collaborative working can be introduced at undergraduate level and continued at the postgraduate level with the advantage that students are already competent in communicating across boundaries.

A further issue is how to ensure that the necessary new skills are included in the curriculum. For instance, to create sustainable communities, planners need to understand how perceptions of difference can affect the decisions made. Influential reports on the skills needed to develop sustainable communities in the UK, such as that chaired by Egan (2004) and Demos (2007), failed to recognise the importance of what is termed cross-cultural skill or cultural competence (Bryant 2001) or what I would like to see termed cross-cultural communication: something planning courses need to address given the increasing diversity of urban areas. Cultural includes all kinds of difference: age, gender, disability race, ethnicity, religion. Gender is a cross-cutting identifier and the challenge for the future will be to create equality-proofing techniques, sensitive to different sectoral groups which can highlight where disparities and inequalities exist so that policies can be put in place to rectify them. So universities need to teach and model the ability to learn different skills and knowledge. Universities, more than at any time, have an obligation to develop student's learning skills and equip professionals for lifelong learning.

Given that Universities are knowledge creators, planning schools need the capacity to ensure that the evidence base of planning is sufficient to the task. This can be done by recognising that research inspires leading 'edge-education'. It means students should be supported in developing planning research skills and becoming part of and contributing to the process of

exploration and discovery, challenging existing thinking and values. Teaching is about modelling this sense of curiosity and yearning for knowledge and understanding. It is about modelling and demonstrating inter-disciplinary working.

Responsibilities of Planning Agencies

Planning agencies include the range of territorial authorities from councils to regional bodies to government. Given that sustainability has a crucial social dimension, which up to now has received much less attention than the environment, planning agencies have a responsibility to ask the following kinds of questions:

- Is urban planning closing the equality gaps in access to employment, quality of environment, quality of the environmental experience, access to open space, ability to get around?
- Is there parity in the confidence different sectors of the public have in the way planning consents, complaints or objections are considered; in the relevance of plans to people's lives and the way plans are formulated?

When it comes to satisfaction:

- Is there parity in the satisfaction levels of different groups of people to the planning process and the outcomes?
- Is there a measurable improvement in community relations between different racial, cultural, religious groups or between groups of different ages, neighbourhoods and adjacent communities?

When it comes to improvement:

- Is there a measurable improvement in workforce representation within government planning agencies and consultancies?
- Is there parity in employment satisfaction levels between different groups of people? (CRE 2003).

Responsibilities of Professional Institutes

As well as Universities and planning agencies, planning institutes have a major responsibility for maintaining and developing excellence in

planners; requiring, rewarding, expecting and modelling it. Institutes need to ensure that professionals have the appropriate thinking and practice skills for the challenges of the future and recognise that these may well be context-specific. Professional institutes set standards for the profession; they accredit programmes. At best, professional institutes provide important leadership in terms of the content and direction of education and lifelong learning, policy and practice. Those who commit themselves to urban planning also commit to developing the profession and the discipline through their work and through their reflections.

Professional planners have an obligation to create plans, which connect with everyone, and an obligation to create planning processes which provide opportunities for different groups of people to be involved. Institutes need to specify diversity and equality as areas all members are required to cover in their lifelong learning, given that they cut across all areas and sectors of planning. The RTPI has already done this (RTPI 2003). The concepts of difference, diversity and equality are dynamic and context-specific. Education guidelines in the UK produced by the Royal Town Planning Institute now specify the need for planning learning outcomes 'to appreciate and respect diversity of cultures, views and ideologies and understand how that respect can be applied in planning systems through the pursuit of equal opportunity, social inclusion and non-discrimination on the grounds of wealth, gender, age, race, disability, religion and culture' RTPI, (2003, 6.7.8).

Responsibilities of Individual Professionals

Professionals have responsibilities to maintain their competence to practice in whatever particular field they operate. In relation to equality and diversity they need to :

- Ensure clear accountability for diversity and equality.
- Identify how policy is contributing to the promotion of equality
- Engage in training and lifelong learning, reflecting deeply on the value base of practice to see things differently

In addition professionals need to:

- Think through what they can do at a team level in terms of how their work contributes to the promotion of equality through the diversity approach and train professionals to work with grass roots groups.

- Make diversity and equality visible in the mainstreaming agenda.

Initial education needs to be much more effective in introducing students to the notion of planning for a diverse community. Experience has shown that without systematic audits, plans may unintentionally reinforce inequalities and miss opportunities to do more to promote equality and respect for difference (Greed 2005). Arguably equality is at the heart of excellence, yet in the UK many planners still complete their initial planning education with little knowledge of how equality legislation is likely to affect their work (Thomas 2008). Many do not undertake any kind of cross-cultural communication training which develops the skill of looking at issues from different perspectives and challenging one's own beliefs and attitudes towards people.

When the initial professional education has ended, the continuous development of the professional becomes crucial. Continual professional development (CPD) has been the traditional means of establishing a professional's responsibility to maintain their competence whereas lifelong learning is:

'All learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic, social or employment related perspective' (European Commission 2001).

Educators provide the knowledge and skills base to start professionals on their careers. Through continuous learning and development in initial planning education and through continuous lifelong learning, professionals and those engaged in planning must continue to develop their knowledge and expertise. Bryant's Five Habits on Cultural Competence, which I have adapted for planning (Reeves 2005), now using the term cross-cultural communication (Reeves 2008), provide a very useful and effective teaching and professional learning tool, which individuals can continue to use in practice. Unless officials and politicians explicitly set out equality and cultural issues in the policy documents which form the basis of future decisions, progress towards an equal and culturally sensitive society will continue to be slow

Urban planning in the future will be about edge-ucation, response-ability and sustain-ability. These are the challenges that need to be met and Australasia is well placed to respond to the challenges facing urban planning and to make significant international contributions. A platform

for development can be built by studying how accomplished planners do their job in transforming understanding into practical and achievable outcomes and how planners who have addressed equality and diversity have succeeded. Equality is after all at the heart of excellence.

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